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AUTHOR Spreadbury, Connie
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ABSTRACT

The study assessed young adults' attitudes toward childlessness and identified certain factors which predict positive or negative attitudes toward childlessness. The author anticipated finding changes in attitudes because of recent social developments such as awareness of world overpopulation, availability of birth control methods, pressure for equal rights for men and women, and increased cost of childrearing. Participants in the study were 240 students enrolled in marriage and family classes at a Texas university. Women comprised 68% of the sample, and 85% of all respondents were single. A questionnaire measured independent variables such as sex, religious affiliation, importance of money, and preference of size of group they liked to be with. An attitude scale elicited five responses from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" on 20 statements about childlessness. Analysis of responses indicates that young adults as represented by the sample are ambivalent toward childlessness. Students who were younger and more religious tended to have negative attitudes toward childlessness. Students with positive attitudes tended to value their freedom and were less religious and jealous. (AV)

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PREDICTORS OF ATTITUDES TOWARD CHILDLESSNESS

By

Connie Spreadbury

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Department of Sociology, Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, Texas 75961

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INTRODUCTION

The past decade has witnessed the emergence of at least four developments influencing people's attitudes toward parenthood. The first and the most general of the developments is a massive increase in awareness of the magnitude and imminence of the problem of world over-population. The second influence is the generally easy availability of birth control pills which have made it possible to translate changes in attitudes into changes in behavior. The third of these is the increasing pressure toward equal rights for men and women. Movius (1976), for example, proposes that women who are committed to careers may benefit from childlessness because it gives them greater mobility, fewer family commitments, and more time for professional development. Also ranking high in the developments effecting people's attitudes toward parenthood is the increasing cost involved in childbearing and child-rearing. In 1972 it was estimated that the cost to the average family was anywhere from $80,000 to $150,000 to rear two children and send them through college (High Cost of Kids, 1972). Today the figure must be substantially higher due to inflation.

Much research has been conducted recently to measure the effects of these four developments on people's attitudes toward parenthood and, more specifically, on people's attitudes toward children (Pohlman, 1970; Gustavus, 1971; Glick, 1975; Veever, 1975). No one, however, has investigated people's attitudes toward childlessness. This absense of research is remarkable considering the fact that substantial changes are occuring in terms of young peoples attitudes toward remaining childless as an alternative family style (Green, 1963; Veever, 1963; Albert, 1966; Michels, 1970; Rollin, 1970; Peck, 1971; Silverman and Silverman, 1971; Balchin, 1974; Heilman, 1974; Veever, 1974).

This study is an attempt to rectify the paucity of documented research in this area by being concerned with two questions not dealt with in previous discussions. First, what attitudes do young people have toward childlessness? Second, what factors best predict positive, negative, and neutral attitudes toward the dependent variables?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The extent of couples with no children is not generally well known, except that it is low. Various sources, for example, estimate childlessness in the United States at four (Rao, 1974), six (Matinson, 1960), eight (Whelpton and Campbell, 1966), ten (Bowman, 1965), eleven (Blood and Wolfe, 1960), and fifteen (Womble, 1966) percent. There is some evidence to suggest that childlessness is on the increase probably due to deliberate planning. The U. S. Bureau of the Census (1976a) reports that in 1960 twenty percent of ever-married women under the age of 30 were childless, this had increased to 27 percent by 1970 and 32 percent by 1975.

The rate of voluntary childlessness is less well known, but appears to be lower and on the increase. For example, in 1960 Blood and Wolfe found that less than one percent of the couples whom they studied said that they did not want to have children. This percent had only increased to 4.6 percent by 1975 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1976b). Of the women who are childless, between one-third (Gabill, 1958) and one-half (Grabill, 1958; Veever, 1972b) said they were childless by choice, and one-quarter expects to remain childless over their entire life (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1976c).

Attitude changes, as expected, are most evident among the young. A Gallop poll (1973) found only one percent of Americans saw the childless family as "ideal", but fifteen percent of students at private universities

planned no children (American Council on Education, 1973) and a similar percent of high school students wanted no children (Brown, Lieberman and Miller, 1975).

There is also a striking relationship between age at marriage, educational level, race and the proportion of couples with no children. The younger the age at marriage, the lower the incidence of childlessness (Whelpton, Campbell, and Patterson, 1066; Veever, 1971a). The proportion childless for those who married at age 21 or less was 6 percent, at age 22 to 25 it was eleven percent, and for those marrying at age 25 and over it increased to twenty percent. The rate of childlessness is also related to educational level (Glick, 1975). Twenty two percent of college educated women in the United States and seven percent of those with less than high school education remained childless, i.e., the lower the educational attainment the fewer the childless families. In addition, to education and age at marriage, Veever (1971b) and Kunz and Brinkeroff (1969) found that a correlation existed between race and the incidence of childlessness. That is, nonwhites had a childlessness rate twice that of whites.

METHODOLOGY

SUBJECTS

The respondents in this study were 240 students enrolled in Marriage and Family classes at Stephen F. Austin State University (Nacogdoches, Texas) from the fall of 1975 to the fall of 1976. Most of the subjects were middle class residents of large urban areas in Texas who were taking the Marriage and Family course as an elective. Sixty-eight percent of them were women, eighty-five percent were single, eighty-six percent were upperclassmen, seventy-seven percent were Protestant, and only twenty-two percent came from families with five or more children.

PROCEDURE

A questionnaire approximately four pages long was submitted to the respondents during a regular class period about midway through the semester prior to the discussion of parenthood. The subjects were given fifteen minutes to complete the 45 questions concerning themselves and their attitudes.

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

For the purpose of isolating a composite of independent variables which may explain the variability in attitudes toward childlessness, it was important to consider a number of demographic items such as sex, university classification, marital status, family size, religious affiliation, religiosity (7 point scale) social class (based on father's occupation), and mother's working status.

In addition to the above items, it was also considered important to obtain information which is often considered to be instrumental in one's determination not to have children. These items included the importance of money, freedom, and a "good" life style. Subjects were also asked how jealous, possessive, and private a person they were, and whether they minded people asking them what they were thinking. These items were all rated on a six point scale of not at all, not very, average, more than average, very, and extremely. Respondents were also asked what size of group they preferred to be with, and were provided with the choices of being alone, with one other person, being in a small group, or being in a large group.

DEPENDENT VARIABLE

All respondents completed a short likert-typed attitude scale measuring attitudes toward childlessness which the researcher had constructed. This scale included twenty statements which could be responded to by strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, and strongly disagree.

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

ATTITUDE STATEMENTS

The first question this paper is concerned with is what were the respondents attitudes toward childlessness. In Table I are found summaries of the percent of respondents who agreed with the twenty statements in the Attitude Toward Childlessness Scale. Since we are primarily interested in overall attitudes and the analytic aspects of this study, this table will be commented on only briefly.

The data show that the students enrolled in Marriage and Family courses were generally ambivalent toward childlessness. Forty-two percent felt that childless couples "can more easily become the person they could be" and thirty-three percent felt that these couples "can become much closer together;" but in general, not many people agreed with the positive statements and most of them disagreed with the negative statements. This neutrality may indicate a problem with the statements in the attitude scale; however, what emerged in later class discussions with the respondents was a general ambivalence towards those who remain childless; i.e., they expressed feelings of sadness that these childless couples would miss out on the joys of raising children as well as a feeling of envy that they would have more free time and money to spend on themselves.

(Table I Here)

ATTITUDE PREDICTORS

The second question this paper is concerned with is the question of what factors best predict the attitude one has toward childlessness. Attitudes scores were divided into three types: negative attitudes toward childlessness (scores under 55), neutral attitudes (55 to 64), and positive attitudes (65 and over). There were twenty-five respondents which could be labelled as negative,

and eighty-two who were positive toward childlessness. Most, or one-hundred-thirty-five subjects were in the neutral category in terms of attitudes. In order to assess the effects of all the independent variables together in explaining these three types of attitudes toward childlessness, the researcher employed a step-wise multiple regression procedure which allowed seeing the proportion of the variance which is explained by combinations of the independent variable.

Table 2 reveals that the best predictors of overall attitude toward childlessness were: the importance the respondents attributed to freedom, their religiosity, how private and jealous a person they were, their sex, marital status, and family size. The sixteen variables entered into the regression analysis explained 21 percent of the variance in attitudes toward childlessness.

Negative attitudes: the best predictor of negative attitudes toward childlessness were religiosity and classification, i.e. the more negative the respondents were toward childless families the younger and more religious they were. This is to be expected as younger students have not had much opportunity to question values which they have been taught by their parents and by their religion, and most people and most religions are unfavorable toward childless families. Although only these two independent variables were significant at the .05 level, the combined effect of all the variables entered into the equation is the explanation of 72 percent of the variance in the dependent variable. Religiosity and classification accounted for 39 percent of the explanation.

Neutral attitudes: only 7 percent of the variance in the neutral attitudes were explained, and only one independent variable, sex (women), was statistically significant at the .05 level.

Positive attitudes: four variables can be utilized to predict positive attitudes toward childlessness: jealousy, religiosity, the importance the

respondents attributed to freedom and a "good" life style. They valued their freedom a great deal, rejected a "good" life style and were less religious and jealous. Twenty-eight percent of the variance was explained by the fifteen variables included in the regression, and the four above variables explained 21 percent of that variance.

(Table 2 here)

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper has been to address the important question of attitudes toward childlessness. Our analysis of the variables which affect attitudes toward childlessness uncovered factors which influence the attitudes of college students. First, the best predictors of negative attitudes are religiosity, (i.e., the more religious, the more negative), and classification, (i.e. the lower the classification, the more negative the attitude toward childlessness). These two variables alone explained 39 percent of the variation in attitude.

Second, positive attitudes were best predicted by jealousy (i.e. less jealous), religiosity, (i.e. less religious) and a greater valuation of freedom and a lesser valuation of a "good" life style. These four variables explain 21 percent of the variation in attitude.

TABLE I. PERCENT OF 240 RESPONDENTS WHO RESPONDED TO ATTITUDE STATEMENTS ABOUT CHILDLESSNESS

	Agreed	Disagreed	Undecided
POSITIVE STATEMENT			
1. People in childless marriages can develop more easily into the person they could be	43	34	23
2. Childless couples can become much closer to each other	33	37	30
3. Childless couples are well-adjusted people	22	24	54
4. Marriages with children are not ideal marriages	21	65	14
5. People in childless marriages understand themselves	20	28	52
6. Childless marriages have a better chance of working	11	59	30
7. Married couples without children can get more enjoyment out of life than those with children	8	74	18
8. People in childless marriages are more interesting people than people with children	7	72	21
9. Childless couples are more likely to remain in love	7	62	31
10. Childless marriages are the ideal marriage	5	77	18
11. Childless marriages are happier than those with children	4	76	20
NEGATIVE STATEMENT			
12. Childless couples have nothing to unite them	2	92	6
13. There is something wrong with people who do not want children	3	92	5
14. On the long run childless marriages will not work out	3	86	11
15. Only children can really bring a couple close together	4	89	7
16. Childless couples who can afford children but do not want them are selfish	5	88	7
17. Childless marriages are unfortunate	7	81	12
18. Childless marriages are empty	10	72	18
19. Childless marriages are lonely	20	60	20
20. Marriages with children are more fun than those without	32	42	26

TABLE 2. STEP-WISE REGRESSION OF INDEPENDENT VARIABLES ON ATTITUDE TOWARD CHILDLESSNESS

		Multiple R	R^2	F
PART A:	REGRESSION OF ATTITUDE TOWARD CHILDLESSNESS ON (N=239) (Scores between 20-100)			
	importance of freedom	.267	.071	18.267**
	religiosity	.343	.118	12.575**
	private person	.378	.143	6.747**
	jealousy	.401	.161	5.205**
	sex	.423	.178	4.950**
	marital status	.436	.190	3.224**
	family size	.445	.198	2.290*
	possessiveness	.448	.200	.829
	classification	.451	.203	.693
	mother's working status	.453	.305	.549
	group size preferred	.454	.207	.585
	like being asked what I am thinking	.457	.209	.575
	importance of money	.458	.210	.221
	importance of "good" life style	.459	.211	.214
	religious affiliation	.459	.211	.092
	social class	.459	.211	.066
PART B:	REGRESSION OF NEGATIVE ATTITUDE TOWARD CHILDLESSNESS ON (N=25) (SCORES UNDER 55)			
	religiosity	.462	.214	6.249*
	classification	.642	.389	6.316**
	like being asked what I am thinking	.652	.426	1.343
	importance of money	.688	.474	1.830
	social class	.717	.515	1.592
	importance of "good" life style	.745	.555	1.616
	family size	.778	.606	2.214
	mother's working status	.810	.656	2.321
	religious affiliation	.828	.687	1.485
	possessiveness	.835	.698	.492
	group size preferred	.838	.701	.185
	jealousy	.840	.705	.141
	sex	.841	.709	.135
	marital status	.847	.717	.290
	importance of freedom	.848	.719	.060

PART C: REGRESSION OF NEUTRAL ATTITUDE TOWARD CHILDLESSNESS ON (N-135) (SCORES BETWEEN 54 & 65)

sex	.176	.031	4.238*
importance of money	.212	.045	1.919
private person	.224	.050	.710
family size	.232	.054	.480
religiosity	.237	.056	.335
like being asked what I am thinking	.243	.059	.395
social class	.249	.062	.363
marital status	.253	.064	.306
classification	.255	.165	.101
importance of freedom	.256	.066	.095
possessiveness	.258	.066	.089
jealousy	.259	.067	.109
group size preferred	.260	.068	.068
importance of "good" life style	.261	.068	.054

PART D: REGRESSION OF POSITIVE ATTITUDE TOWARD CHILDLESSNESS ON (N-82) (SCORES OVER 65)

jealousy	.308	.095	8.274**
religiosity	.365	.133	3.430*
importance of freedom	.424	.180	4.390**
importance of "good" life style	.460	.212	3.082*
religious affiliation	.477	.228	1.542
family size	.493	.243	1.472
classification	.505	.255	1.244
private person	.513	.263	.794
mother's working status	.518	.268	.490
importance of money	.524	.274	.549
marital status	.527	.278	.306
group size preferred	.528	.280	.152
like being asked what I am thinking	.530	.281	.147
possessiveness	.531	.282	.057
social class	.531	.282	.053

* STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT AT THE .05 LEVEL
** STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT AT THE .01 LEVEL

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